

Women's Role in Social Class and Status

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A successful theme in a novel can be described as “the central idea, concern, or purpose in a literary work” (Roberts and Jacobs 2108). There are multiple themes portrayed throughout the novel *Pride and Prejudice*, written by Jane Austen. However, one of the more popular themes relates to the role women played in class structure. Throughout history, women's rights leaders have fought for equality in a society where men have primarily dominated. Specifically, women have been forced to depend on the men in their lives to provide for their every need. Austen's main goal in writing the book was to bring to light the flaws in society and highlight the inequalities women faced every day. Women's oppression during the 1800s was prevalent in most aspects of society, including land ownership, marriage, and education.

Specifically highlighted in *Pride and Prejudice*, women were not allowed to own land and relied heavily upon the man of the house for means of living. The Bennet's estate was entailed to Mr. Collins, their distant cousin, which meant as soon as Mr. Bennet died, the family had nowhere to live. In the novel, Mrs. Bennet voices her fear by saying, “Pray do not talk of that odious man. I do think it is the hardest thing in the world, that your estate should be entailed away from your own children” (Austen and Jones 61). Even though Mr. Bennet had five daughters of his own, only men could own land. Therefore, there was a constant worry of the man of the house dying or being killed. Throughout the novel it may come across as Mrs. Bennet being fearsome of her beloved husband dying, but in reality, she is just fearful she will have nowhere to live. The only hope of remaining in the estate was if one of the daughters married the man it was entailed to. When Mr. Collins came to visit, he had every intention of marrying one of the Bennet daughters. In the novel, it is observed that Mr. Collins “intended to marry; and in

seeking a reconciliation with the Longbourn family he a wife in view, as he meant to chuse of the daughters..." (Austen and Jones 69). However, when he proposed to Elizabeth Bennet, she rejected him, despite the security of having a permanent residency at Longbourn.

Marriage was another example of oppression that women faced daily. Marriage was the only way to promise a women security, yet it was entirely up to the men to decide if the woman was worthy of marrying. Charlotte Lucas explains the importance of women throwing themselves at men by saying, "In nine cases out of ten, a woman had better shew more affection than she feels" (Austen and Jones 23). This type of situation is highlighted by Mr. Bingley who was jerked away from Jane because Mr. Darcy felt she was not attracted to him. Even though she was very much in love with him, she was just guarded in her feelings. Another atrocious custom used during this time period was betrothment or promising a young girl to a man without the consent or an opinion from the girl. Lady Catherine confronts Elizabeth about a similar situation in which she assumes her daughter is betrothed to Mr. Darcy. In the novel, Lady Catherine says, "This match, to which you have the presumption to aspire can never take place. Mr. Darcy is engaged to *my daughter*" (Austen and Jones 335). During this conversation, Lady Catherine attempts to use wealth and class status to force Elizabeth away from Mr. Darcy. However, her plan fails drastically and actually brings the two closer together which in turn leads to their marriage at the end of the novel.

Education was a privilege solely set aside for men. Therefore, women were seen as unintellectual and unworthy of forming thoughts of their own. During the 1800s, education was seen as "unnecessary" for women to such a degree that it was seen as "suspicious" for a woman to be intellectual (Faye 87). Throughout many of her novels, Jane Austen criticizes this inequality by saying, "A women especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything,

should conceal it as best as she can” (Faye 87). Jane Austen is alluding to the fact that women were only good for childbearing, taking care of the household, and caring for the needs of her husband. Therefore, if she had any type of education it would be best to hide it, or she could be found unattractive. A prime example of educated women being looked down upon in *Pride and Prejudice* is the character Mary Bennet. Mary Bennet is the middle child of the family and is often overlooked. Men are never attracted to her and in her family, she is seen as the “plain” daughter (Fullerton 88). Therefore, she feels isolated from the family and tries to gain attention by reading books and reciting quotes. However, Mary is often seen as foolish and unwise for attempting to assert her opinion and often portrays comic relief in the novel at the hand of her father (Fullerton 89).

It is clearly evident that Jane Austen wishes to bring out the flaws of class structure in her novel. Whether she portrays this inequality through land ownership, marriage, or education, the reader can easily comprehend the oppression women faced. Each of the characters in *Pride and Prejudice* are directly affected by class structure. Therefore, they display the highs and lows of wealth and power. The best example of Jane Austen’s feelings is when she says, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (Austen and Jones 5).

Works Cited

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